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To: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>,
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Cc: <Harold_Varmus@nih.gov>
Subject: RE: Unam sanctam catholicam et apostilicam ejournal
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Nick, Pat, & Harold,

Since I was cc'ed on this exchange I will state my views as well.

I'm sure we all agree that NIH should not have an exclusive role in biomedical publishing. I will go further to claim that even if E-biomed is a stupendous success, there is no way it could ever be the exclusive source of biomedical publications. Publishing is, and has always been, far too open a market for complete domination by a single source. The ease of electronic publishing makes this even less likely. The real question is whether NIH has a legitimate role in the publishing of biomedical information.

The current publishing system developed before the government and a few foundations became such dominant sources of research support, and long before the heavy investments in information technology which made electronic publishing possible. The explosive growth and diversity of the web have been driven by free and open access. Many high-profile attempts at subscription and toll-based access have failed and reverted to open access (e.g. a variety of magazines and newspapers, including Slate). One could argue that the economic basis behind much of this explosion of free information on the web (e.g. subsidies from advertising revenue) is far different from that of biomedical research. But biomedical research is itself subsidized - and the funding agencies goals certainly include maximizing the number of eyes seeing this material. By creating a system which will allow much of this scientific information to be fully accessible, the community will have the full benefit of all of the ongoing evolution and developments of the web.

So I believe it is not only legitimate for NIH to be involved in electronic publication of primary biomedical research, but that this involvement follows logically from its goals in funding biomedical research and from the dramatic changes in communication made possible by the internet. It is clear however that many of those currently in publishing, including a number of the scientific societies, fear this involvement.

Odlyzko has repeatedly and convincingly described the conservatism of the academic community. This conservatism will slow the effect of E-biomed on existing journals. I am confident that most publishers and scientific societies will have time to adapt. Over time I believe we'll see tremendous evolution in approaches to scientific communication and publication - both

within E-biomed, "around" E-biomed (i.e., sites which provide particular views or commentaries of E-biomed content), and outside E-biomed, within the publishing arms of the societies as well as within the journals of commercial publishers.

Although I'm confident of this prediction of gradual change, it would be disingenuous to claim that E-biomed will have no impact on existing journals. Despite this, the benefits of this new system are so great, we must go forward.

I am confused by Nick's implication that E-biomed will lead to some sort of harmful uniformity. The only substantive ways journals differ with respect to their publication of primary research is scope and standards. It would seem that Harold's proposal would promote diversity of scope and editorial policies in the same manner as the current system. The various journals and editorial boards attached to E-biomed would compete for authors just as the current system does. These E-biomed journals and editorial boards will also compete for authors with the more streamlined submission approach favored by Pat and myself. And the papers entering E-biomed from that latter approach will certainly be diverse in scope and quality.

The notion of scientific journals competing with each other makes some sense when you think about their "value-added" content - news, editorials, perspective pieces, reviews - but it makes less sense with primary research reports. What concerns me about the current system is that it balkanizes the primary research literature. It is unquestionably true that, because of its open accessibility, the primary research within E-biomed will be available in far more diverse ways and views than the current system. I think arguments regarding diversity, competition, and control must be thought through carefully here. For the aspects of biomedical publication that are important to me, E-biomed will lead to greater diversity, more competition, and more openness.

I agree with Nick about avoiding adversarial relationships - so I hope this message hasn't fanned any flames!

Regards,
David